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SUBJECT: FICO'S ROLE MODEL: VLADIMIR PUTIN?

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11. (C) Name this leader: He consolidated power and popularity during a period of unprecedented economic growth. As a hedge against any current or future challengers, he attacks the opposition and media relentlessly. He accuses NGOs of seeking to undermine the government and has supported legislation aimed at eviscerating them. He's highly suspicious about the intentions of Western energy interests; he conveys the message that their exclusive focus on profits undermines the security and well-being of the country. He subscribes, at least rhetorically, to the idea of "Slavic solidarity," and thus is unyieldingly opposed to Kosovo's independence. He blames Ukraine for the recent gas crisis. And he rarely has a positive public word to say about the United States. Who is it? No, not Vladimir Putin. It's Slovak Premier Robert Fico.

Fico: Ideologically Consistent, Yet Pragmatically Flexible  
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12. (C) AmEmbassy Bratislava has followed Robert Fico's career for many years. His ambition and intelligence were always apparent. So, was his leftist orientation, as well as his generally negative outlook regarding the U.S. A review of past conversations with Fico -- as opposition leader, prime ministerial aspirant, and now Prime Minister -- demonstrates ideological consistency over the years, particularly his unwavering fealty to the idea of a "social state" and his disdain for concerns about democracy and good governance. Fico told a former U.S. Ambassador that "on the campaign trail, no one asks me about democracy, only about how they can live on 300 dollars a month." It also highlights the facility with which Fico tells his interlocutors one thing and then does something completely different, e.g., after having explicitly ruled out a coalition including Jan Slota's SNS and Meciar's HZDS, he turned around and formed a government with precisely those parties.

13. (C) Another pattern emerges, too: as Fico has moved up in the world, his interest in close relations and dialogue with the U.S. appears to have lessened. In 2005, as an opposition leader, Fico actually sought U.S. blessing for a trip to Libya after having been criticized for a controversial 2003 visit to Belarus. Now, despite warm words in one-on-one meetings with American ambassadors, it's clear Fico doesn't think he needs anything from us. Neither does he hesitate to publicly suggest that various U.S. policies (or policymakers) are arrogant, immoral, and provocative, despite the fact that a leitmotif of our conversations over many years is that Allies should voice disagreements privately and respectfully.

Why Doesn't Fico Like the U.S.?  
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14. (C) Some political insiders claim that Fico's less-than-positive attitudes toward the U.S. stemmed from his reluctance to engage with former President Bush, with whom

Fico's nemesis, ex-PM Mikulas Dzurinda, enjoyed a very good relationship. Some also posit that Fico's hostility had roots in a more personal experience. In 2002, Fico publicly stated that the U.S. Embassy had information about corrupt dealings by then-Finance Minister Miklos. Miklos sued him for defamation and when Fico asked then-Ambassador Weiser to testify on his behalf, the Ambassador declined, citing sovereign immunity and diplomatic practice. According to some insiders, Fico has nursed a grudge ever since.

15. (C) Fico's coolness to the U.S. makes sense when one considers that he once famously said that he hadn't noticed the events of 1989, that he has expressed personal admiration for Gustav Husak, the Czechoslovak premier who ushered in the grim years of "normalization" following the crushing of Prague Spring, and that he is widely viewed as a "Bolshevik" by his critics. Whatever the reasons -- and we tend to think they are indeed largely ideological and deeply rooted -- when Fico came to power, his top foreign policy priority was to rebalance Slovak foreign relations. To Fico that meant strengthening ties with Moscow and downgrading relations with Washington. Fico denigrated former PM Dzurinda as "Bush's lap dog," accusing him of turning Slovakia into "an island of American influence" in Central Europe.

Why Does He Like Russia so Much? A Brief Historical Note  
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16. (C) Fico's father was an active member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Fico himself was already 25 when the Berlin Wall fell; his formative years and education took place in the communist era. While we certainly can never know ever

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factor that contributed to Fico's Russophilia, the fact that what is now Slovakia enjoyed its fastest and broadest period of industrialization and development during the communist period certainly shaped Fico's perceptions. In the pre-World War II period, many Slovaks felt oppressed by the Czechs and angered that the equality within the state that they thought had been promised in Paris was not forthcoming. It was the Soviet Army that liberated the Slovaks in 1945, and the advent of communism brought progress and greater equality between Czechs and Slovaks.

17. (C) It was following the tragic events of the Prague Spring that the Slovaks finally, permanently gained the federative status they had long sought. For some Slovaks, this advancement in self-government outweighed the negatives of the post-1968 normalization. And, because Bratislava was viewed as a provincial backwater, the crackdown on students and dissidents was not as sharp here as it was in Prague. As a whole, and given the Slovaks' history of domination by various European powers, the communist period is not perceived as negatively here as it is in Prague, Warsaw, or Budapest. As another Slovak Russofile, former PM Jan Carnogursky once told us, "but for the communist period, the Slovaks and the Russians have always gotten along well. Those 40 years were a mere blip. Now things are returning to their natural state." And it's a "natural state" with which Fico seems quite comfortable.

Fico's Policies: Foreign or Domestic, from Putin's Playbook  
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18. (C) While Fico has never, as prime minister, put forward a formal request to visit the U.S., the travel destinations of Fico and his top lieutenants suggest a certain nostalgia for their erstwhile socialist comrades: Vietnam, China, Libya, Cuba, and Russia. That is not to say that Fico hasn't also visited many European capitals, as well, but it's worth remembering that one of his first overseas trip after becoming Prime Minister was supposed to be to Venezuela (until wiser heads at the MFA prevailed). PM Fico recently attended (yet again) the Cuban Embassy's reception honoring

the anniversary of Castro's revolution, and Slovak and Cuban officials quietly signed a bilateral economic cooperation agreement last October. More startling was the news that the GOS signed an amendment to the protocol on investment and cooperation with North Korea on January 27.

¶9. (C) On any number of foreign policy issues, PM Fico's talking points often seem as if they might have been drafted in Moscow, not Bratislava. Fico criticized U.S. recognition of Kosovo as a "rough violation of international law." On missile defense, after then-President Putin stated in a May 2007 joint press conference that he would consider pointing rockets at Poland and the Czech Republic, Fico said that he "understood Russia's concerns." Although the EU and NATO positions on the Russian invasion of Georgia have largely hemmed Fico in, his recent public statements on Ukraine echo Moscow's arguments that fault for the January 2009 natural gas stoppage primarily lay with Kyiv. And we would not be surprised if Slovakia's heretofore solid support for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration were negatively affected, although we have yet to see any concrete signs of this.

¶10. (C) Fico's domestic playbook also eerily resembles that of Putin. When a watchdog NGO criticized the PM's party -- but also Dzurinda's SDKU -- for benefiting from artificially low rents for party headquarters -- Fico threatened the group with a lawsuit if it did not retract its statements, adding that "I reject such rough manipulation of public opinion by Alliance Fair Play, connected to Soros' money." During a months-long dispute with the French and German shareholders of Slovakia's gas company, SPP, over their desire to raise natural gas prices, Fico threatened ominously that "if SPP continues to provoke us, we will go further than the veto on the SPP bodies." He was clearer in this statement: "I would like to remind all foreign owners of power monopolies that the Slovak Constitution permits expropriation in the public interest."

Will His Tight Hold on Power Backfire?  
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¶11. (C) Much as Putin has done in Russia, Fico has created a "vertical system of power," in which decisions emanate from the very top. Many analysts posit that under conditions of crisis, the system lacks flexibility and may turn into a trap for its creator. In 2003, several Fico colleagues described his leadership style as "rigid, top-down management." An MP who co-chaired the Defense Committee with then-opposition MP Robert Kalinak told the Embassy that before agreeing to

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anything, Kalinak would go into the hallway to call party boss Fico and get his blessing. Frankly, we don't think much has changed. But as we are sure Fico himself has realized, it's much easier to run a party this way than to run a government.

¶12. (C) Now Fico -- whose leadership style, even in the best of times, seems marked by paranoia and fear that his poll numbers will fall -- is beginning to feel real economic pressures for the first time. After years of robust economic growth, mostly courtesy of the Dzurinda Government, Fico is scrambling to preserve his base amidst the global recession and mounting job losses. Opposition figures have long predicted that Fico's voters, content to let him essentially control everything so long as their standard of living was rising would sooner or later realize that his much-vaunted promises of a social state have not been fulfilled and turn on him. This scenario could materialize sooner than expected.

¶13. (C) During a speech to parliament on February 5, Fico betrayed growing anxiety in a rant against the media for "spreading hysteria" about the economic crisis. In particular, the proximate cause of the outburst appears to have been an on-line poll conducted by the daily Sme asking: "will the economic crisis cause Smer's preferences to

decline?" Of 5,333 respondents, 50 percent said yes. Apropos of the poll, Fico said that it was proof that the media was immoral and "wanted to sink the state and damage the government." Fico (protesting too much) continued that the responsibility of his government was not to worry about preferences, but to take care of the state, the people, and social stability. Once voters realize (with the help of harsh economic developments) that Fico is unable to keep the good times going, it will be very interesting to see how they -- and, in turn, Fico -- react.

What Does it Mean for the U.S.?

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¶14. (C) Fico's proclivities make him disinclined to support many U.S.-led initiatives, particularly in the military/security realm. While the coaxing and pressure of NATO Allies convinced him of the need to contribute to Afghanistan (albeit modestly), extensive budget cuts at the defense ministry and the GOS's continued downward revisions of GDP could weaken Slovakia's ability to increase its contributions to ISAF. More generally, Fico is, among European leaders, an outlier on foreign policy issues on which the U.S. and Russia disagree. Fico's last-minute attempt to water down missile defense language at the Bucharest NATO Summit, for example, could have complicated enormously the Czech Republic's ability to secure domestic approval for the deal. Finally, his tolerance of high-level governmental corruption and malfeasance is undermining the public's -- and our -- confidence in the rule of law in Slovakia. The good news is that membership in NATO and the EU places important, if sometimes difficult to enforce, constraints on the Slovak Government.

¶15. (C) In the wake of President Obama's election, we have heard informally that Fico may now be interested in visiting the United States. He has also appointed a new Foreign Minister who views strengthened relations with the U.S. as one of his top three priorities. And on many important issues we cooperate closely with the Slovaks. Nevertheless, the question we continue to grapple with is: how do we effectively relate to a state which, despite its NATO and EU labels, is led by a man who gives every impression of wanting to be Central Europe's own Vladimir Putin?

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